

Opening Minds & Opening Hearts!

*A newsletter of the National Conference for Community and Justice of Connecticut and Western Massachusetts, Inc.
Founded in 1927 as the National Conference of Christians and Jews*



Left to right ANYTOWN delegates: Brishell Soca Guzman, Tommy Tyler, Kris Venezuela

ANYTOWN[©]

How ANYTOWN Changed Me

by *Brishell Soca Guzman*

It all started with a hot, musty bus ride and weird singing staff, and ended with 'Lean On Me' songs and crying. I did not want to leave this new ANYTOWN Family. It's crazy how in a matter of 5 days I became so attached to these strangers who became friends that I'll keep for the rest of my life.

The atmosphere of ANYTOWN is nothing like society today. The people are caring and understanding, and you can be your true self and not be judged for it. ANYTOWN is like my home away from home. The advisors and counselors are great - their tremendous energy, silliness and positive outlook are extremely contagious. They really made me feel comfortable enough to step out of my bubble and remember what it's like to have fun again.

Most importantly, through the activities that we did, ANYTOWN really tested my points of view. I got to see daily struggles through different people's perspectives. Anybody can put you in a room and teach you about the issues and problems happening today, but there is nothing as valuable as exploring your own actual experience.

What challenged me the most about this experience was coming back home. I went from paradise to a war of violence, conflict, and disrespect. I felt disgusted and ashamed and I think it has definitely got to change. I learned to not ever underestimate myself, for no matter who you are you can make a difference. ANYTOWN has become my ideal perfect place to be. Nothing will ever have an impact on my life as much as ANYTOWN did. Not only did ANYTOWN touch my heart so deep, but it changed who I am, not for the better, but for the ultimate best I can be.

Inside This Issue...

A Youth to Honor	Page 3
NCCJ Has A Birthday!	Page 4
CCR Comes to Springfield!	Page 5
In the Spotlight	Page 7



ANYTOWN delegates participate in a group activity.

"ANYTOWN has become my ideal perfect place to be. Nothing will ever have an impact on my life as much as ANYTOWN did."

-*Brishell Soca Guzman*

2007 ANNUAL HUMAN RELATIONS AWARDS BANQUET



2007 NCCJ Annual Human Relations Award Banquet—CT
Left—right: Peter Barzach, Amy Jaffe Barzach, honoree and The Honorable Denise Nappier, Treasurer, State of Connecticut.

Once again NCCJ celebrated the work of committed individuals in the regions of Hartford, Connecticut and Western Massachusetts at the Annual Human Relations Awards Banquets. Both evenings were filled with reflections on the contributions of ten unique people and the outstanding work done by them in their communities.

The work of each honoree embodies the principles of NCCJ's mission. We at the NCCJ salute their collective efforts to make our society a better place!

Hartford Hilton, Hartford, Connecticut April 12, 2007

Amy Jaffe Barzach

Founder & Executive Director, Boundless Playgrounds

Richard Booth

CEO, Hartford Steam Boiler Insurance & Inspection, Inc.

The Honorable Denise Nappier

Treasurer, State of Connecticut

James Sicilian, Esq.

Day Pitney, LLP

Osiris Santana, Youth Award Recipient

Wethersfield High School

Chez Josef, Agawam, Massachusetts June 6, 2007

Lester & Carolyn Fontaine

Owners, Fontaine Bros., Inc.

Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro

Sinai Temple, Springfield

Dr. Alonzo Sheffield

Retired Physician

Marilyn Lorenzo, Youth Award Recipient

Greenfield High School



2007 NCCJ Annual Human Relations Award Banquet Honorees—Western MA
Left—right: Marilyn Lorenzo, Carolyn Fontaine, Lester Fontaine, Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro, and Alonzo Sheffield, M.D.

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YOUTH ACTION COALITION

The **Youth Action Coalition (YAC)** is a group of Camp ANYTOWN and BRIDGES alumni and other interested youth who meet to continue social justice training and engage in youth community action projects. **YAC** meets twice a month at the NCCJ offices in Windsor. For more information on **YAC**, contact the NCCJ offices at **860-683-1039 ext. 102** or email kbenkert@nccjtwma.org.

YOUTH AWARD HONOREE

Osiris Santana was honored for his ANYTOWN involvement and Youth Action Coalition (YAC) achievement at the Annual Human Relations Awards Banquet on April 12, 2007 at the Hartford Hilton in Hartford, Connecticut. Each year a panel of judges affiliated with the NCCJ selects a young person who best exemplifies the ideals of the NCCJ's mission. Osiris attends Wethersfield High School where he is a founding member of Students Against Isms and Discrimination (SAID) and has established a cornerstone Wethersfield High School event—Diversity Night. Osiris has been an ANYTOWN delegate, an ANYTOWN counselor and an active member of YAC. In his spare time, Osiris writes poetry and hip hop lyrics on the subject matter of social justice and oppression. He performs his pieces at school coffee houses.



Osiris Santana, Youth Award Recipient at the NCCJ Annual Human Relations Award Banquet April 12, 2007, Hartford, Connecticut.

Photo by Seth Kaye

JUST WHAT IS YAC UP TO?

This year, the Youth Action Coalition is on the move! One of the biggest strengths of the Youth Action Coalition is its diverse membership. YAC members come from schools and communities throughout Connecticut and Western Massachusetts. To reach more students and make the meetings more accessible and exciting, YAC has taken its show on the road! YAC meetings are now being held at schools throughout the region hosted by YAC members. Meetings include discussions about current events, time for students from different schools to talk about their projects and get ideas and feedback from other students, trainings on activism skills, and time for snacks and socializing.

At Hall High School, members are organizing a campaign to replace the offensive Native American imagery associated with their mascot "The Warriors," as well as starting a campaign to eradicate the use of offensive language in school. The students have also organized a letter writing campaign in support of the Jena 6. Throughout the year students will be organizing forums around issues such as sexism. At Classical Magnet High School, students started a new club called ACTION (Awareness Creates Togetherness in Our Neighborhoods.) Through their club, the students are writing and producing skits for "Character Counts Day," and organizing "ACTION Week" for the spring which will include activities such as the Day of Silence, Mix It Up at Lunch, and the screening of a documentary the students are producing about discrimination and prejudice in their school. More schools will be featured in upcoming newsletters, so stay tuned!

In addition to all of the great work that's going on in schools, YAC will be working with the Nobel Peace Prize nominated organization PeaceJam again next year. Throughout the school year, YAC members will be learning about the life and work of Shirin Ebadi, who was the first Muslim woman and first Iranian Nobel Peace Laureate. Shirin won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 in recognition of her efforts to stand up for democracy, especially the struggle for the rights of women and children. YAC members will have the opportunity to attend a conference at Elms College in the spring to meet with Shirin Ebadi as well as hundreds of other young activists for a weekend of workshops, networking, presentations, and community learning.

YAC is ready for the future, too! This fall, YAC members went on its first college tour. Eight YAC members, along with Kelly Benkert and Muneer Panjwani, YAC Coordinator trekked to Boston to check out colleges and get a sample of life in Boston. The group had a great time and learned a lot! YAC is already planning future college visit trips to Western Massachusetts and beyond!

(For information about YAC contact Kelly at kbenkert@nccjtwma.org).



A MESSAGE FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, *Dr. Andrea C. Kandel*

This year is a very special year for us here at NCCJ – we are celebrating our 80th Anniversary of fighting bias, bigotry and racism. The NCCJ has gone through many changes as an organization, especially over the last two years, but has come out stronger and better than ever. I am very proud of our staff, Board of Directors, and the many volunteers that assist in the delivery of our programs. As a society, respectful and compassionate communities begin with self awareness. All of NCCJ's programs stem from this value.

In 1927, at the inception of our organization as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, our founders – including Jane Addams, Charles Evan Hughes, Theodore Roosevelt and many others assembled to establish America's first human relations organization. In doing so, they were sure of one thing: that the human family, when united, guarantees a better future for generations to come. For 80 years we have been eliminating prejudice, bigotry and discrimination throughout every community in the Greater Hartford and Western Massachusetts area. The work has been a struggle at every corner, never allowing us to rest or say we have arrived at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. Still, as more people of all ages, creeds and races join together as an inclusive voice, the light of justice grows. We have embarked into uncharted territory, uncertain of the outcome but faithful that humanity will prevail.

Now we take these next steps forward, advancing conversations and our youth educational programs in order to lift the veil of prejudice and bigotry that obstructs the collective vision of humankind. I hope that each of you will have an opportunity to come and celebrate with us during this wonderful milestone. There are many special forums and events planned for this special year. During the spring we are hosting several forums; one will address marriage equality issues facing the state of Connecticut, and also a dialogue on the Middle East. In Western Massachusetts we have kicked off our Community Conversations on Race and Poverty program with a wonderful theatrical performance by Hartbeat Ensemble. Our Human Relations Award Banquets will be like a homecoming with all present and past Board members, honorees, vice chairs and chairs invited to this special celebration. And in the fall of 2008 to top off our year of celebration, we are planning a very special event. More on that later as plans are confirmed.

I look forward to celebrating with each of you this year and thank you for your continued support of this important work!



Dr. Kandel listens to the concerns of Youth Award Honoree and YAC Member, Osiris Santana

Photo by Seth Kaye

ADULT PROGRAMS

Reframing Middle East Dialogue: Talking About Israel & Palestine Without Polarizing?

Dr. Andrea C. Kandel

This past spring the NCCJ hosted a panel discussion at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Greater Springfield that focused on how to talk about the challenges in the Middle East without polarizing. With the release of Jimmy Carter's book "*Palestine, Peace Not Apartheid*", I was struck by how much inability there was for people to be open, listen, dialogue and learn from each other. Instead, similar to what we saw in the buildup of the Iraq war, there was immediate position taking and name-calling. It feels that as a society, we need to do better. Here at the NCCJ we are pro "open mind" so that we might discern what is best for all human beings in this painful and protracted conflict.

The program was insightful, enlightening and at times, challenging. The panelists included Don G. Ellis, Professor of Communication at the University of Hartford. His expertise is in Conflict Interaction in Groups with special interest in communication issues related to ethno political conflict. Yehezkel Landau is a Faculty Associate in Interfaith Relations at the Hartford Seminary. He lectures internationally on Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations and Middle East peace issues. Hilary Rantisi is Director of the Middle East Initiative at the JFK School of Government at Harvard. She has worked in the NGO community in Jerusalem focusing on issues of religion, politics, and grassroots mobilization efforts.

The three panelists spoke about the importance of listening compassionately to other points of view and to see this conflict as a "profound tragedy" and a political conflict, not religious. As both Yehezkel and Hilary stated, one must avoid taking sides, and first and foremost see everyone as human with suffering on all sides. Ms. Rantisi stated that it is important to use your head, heart and hands. "Use your head to educate yourself. Use your heart to listen compassionately and use your hands to get involved and get active." This was such an outstanding program that we hope to repeat it once more at the Windsor office.

INTERFAITH FORUM



CCR

Community Conversations on Race & Poverty



NCCJ's Award winning Community Conversations on Race Program (CCR) returned to Springfield October 4th with a kick-off event at Western New England College. 75 guests gathered to hear personal testimonials and get a feel for what a CCR dialogue group is like, even participating in a mock discussion group. Ronn Johnson of MassMutual shared his CCR experience with guests and reflected on his encounters with racism, bias and bigotry. Dr. Andrea C. Kandel, Executive Director spoke about her unending reservoir of passion for social justice issues and

her work over the course of the past two decades with the NCCJ. Guests were treated to a ground-breaking performance by the dramatic cast of *The HartBeat Ensemble*. NCCJ Adult Programmer Judith Barlow-Roberts facilitated the entire presentation for the evening and fielded a question and answer session from attendees.

For questions concerning CCR please visit WWW.NCCJCTWMA.ORG or contact Judith Barlow-Roberts at the NCCJ offices at (860) 683-1039, ext. 105.

MEET OUR PROGRAMMING STAFF



NCCJ Adult Programming Specialist, *Judith Barlow-Roberts* Accepting a Call for Community Change

As a youngster, I spent many summer vacations in the sweltering heat of the Mississippi sun. My mother's folks would send for my younger brother and I as soon as school was out in CT. I treasured this opportunity of my carefree youth in spending countless lazy summer afternoons picking berries or riding horses on my uncle's farm. I loved the slow pace of the south—where no one was ever in hurry to rush anywhere. I loved the comfort food--especially the homemade coconut cakes my grandmother would bake for my birthday. Most of all, I'm thankful for having a grandfather who inspired the work that I now do today. My grandfather, C.C. Bryant of McComb, MS stood up in this country during one of the most tumultuous times in the most dangerous state in the union, demanding constitutional protection for all Americans. He accepted his call as a community member to join an organization that wanted to see America fulfill its promise to all citizens. That organization is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It wasn't just black Americans standing up for their rights - it took many voices to challenge a system of inequity.

In 1927 a group of concerned Christians and Jews gathered together to ensure that Americans, regardless of their religious affiliation should have equal access to the political party system. From this small gathering the National Conference for Christians and Jews was formed. Today the NCCJ is known as the National Conference for Community and Justice. It is the mission of the NCCJ to fight bias, bigotry and racism, and promote respect and understanding for all races, religions and cultures. I joined the NCCJ because, like my grandfather, I accepted a call... a call to continue to stand up against discrimination. This legacy continues today through the work of the NCCJ. All of the staff, volunteers, organizations and participants that have accepted a call to improve relations among races, religions and cultures are part of ensuring that this organization will see another 80 years.

NCCJ Youth Programming Specialist, *Kelly Benkert*

Youth Programming Specialist Kelly Benkert's passion in life is to engage young people in activism and social change. NCCJ's quality youth programs successfully bring together a varied array of youth from all socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, races, and ethnicities twice a year through Camp ANYTOWN, and throughout the year in schools through the Bridges Program. Once youth have gone through these educational programs, they are excited to get to work changing their communities and changing the world.



This is where the Youth Action Coalition comes in, giving young people the resources and forum in which they can take their passion and energy and turn it into action for change. Many people say that young people today are apathetic and don't have any interests beyond Facebook or their iPods, but you don't need to look any further than the Youth Action Coalition to know that this isn't true. As YAC continues to grow and expand, we're assisting students as they work to make change in their schools by helping them form new clubs such as ACTION (Awareness Creates Togetherness In Our Neighborhoods). We're providing activism skills trainings in YAC meetings as well as in weekend Activism Institutes; we're developing a new Social Justice Fellows program that will train 10 – 12 high school students each year to be social justice facilitators and campaign leaders. We're linking students up with ongoing campaigns and providing them with resources to get other students involved locally; we're researching and developing pre-packaged campaigns so students have all the tools they need to launch programs in their schools, and having a lot of fun through field trips, guest speakers, movie screenings, and lively discussions.

Our youth programs are strong, and getting stronger everyday. At NCCJ, we not only educate, liberate, and empower youth, but we give them the tools and support they need to be active, engaged citizens and change-makers who are the leaders of tomorrow *and* today.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Erica Broman currently serves as the Chair for the Western Massachusetts Board of the NCCJ. She is the Vice President for Institutional Development at Holyoke Community College in Holyoke, Massachusetts and has been a Board member for over ten years. Prior to joining Holyoke Community College, Erica held positions at the Springfield Symphony Orchestra and with two area television stations. She comes to the chairmanship of the Western Massachusetts Board with some unique qualifications, having watched her mother Kathryn Broman as NCCJ board chair over 20 years ago.



“I have always valued the work of NCCJ. There is no other organization that serves our function in the region. I believe we have a unique responsibility to help forge the links that will make us a better community. There has never been a greater need for the work of NCCJ than there is today. I am especially proud of the Community Conversations on Race and Poverty series that is taking place in the greater Springfield region. A better understanding of the diversity of our community will add tremendously to its strength.”

“I am particularly interested in helping to promote awareness of the NCCJ. We are a voice of moderation and dialogue on issues that usually attract divisiveness and extremism. The more people know about us, the better able we are to show the region how our diversity is our most precious asset.”

Erica holds a bachelors degree in political science from Miami University in Ohio and a Professional Masters in Business Administration from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

FOX 61 Family Fund Awards Grant to NCCJ

The NCCJ received a grant in the amount of \$44,000 from the Fox 61 Family Fund, a fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation. Elsa Veisor, Fox 61 WTIC-TV, Community Affairs Manager and reporters Laurie Perez and Jim Altman presented the grant to Dr. Andrea C. Kandel, NCCJ Executive Director and Bonnie Malley, NCCJ Board Chair at a check presentation event held at the Fox 61 WTIC-TV Studio on October 25, 2007.

The funding will support NCCJ’s mission to promote understanding and respect among all races, religions and cultures through education, conflict resolution and advocacy.



NCCJ Executive Director Andrea C. Kandel, FOX 61’s Community Affairs Manager Elsa Veisor, NCCJ Board Chair Bonnie Malley, FOX 61 Reporter, Jim Altman and FOX 61 Reporter, Laurie Perez.



nccj The National Conference
for Community and Justice

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April 10, 2008 — *CT Annual Human Relations Awards Banquet*
Hilton Hotel, Downtown Hartford

June 17, 2008 — *MA Annual Human Relations Awards Banquet*
Chez Josef, Agawam

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